

“... never authentic, always ‘authentic’“:

Sounding in Pop Music¹

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Authenticity in pop music seems to take the form of an infinite loop. Listen to anyone in music -journalism, the pop music industry or pop music studies - and at some point in the conversation the chameleon of authenticity sneaks in. “The term [...] is part of the everyday vocabulary of musicians, critics, audiences and academics”; and despite numerous critiques “it does not show any signs of disappearing”.² Clearly, authenticity is a favoured term and as such it is no wonder that one finds it in a constant process of recalibration. In recent accounts of pop music studies on authenticity (Pattie 2007, Auslander, 2003, Schumacher 2002, Moore 2002, Keighly 2001), the enigmatic nature of the concept of authenticity has become acknowledged. Building on such notions of authenticity as a “concept which is always on the move”,³ the following paper argues for the productivity of authenticity as a *spoken term* and considers authenticity a performative pop musical speech act. Precisely in authenticity’s constantly shifting nature lies not only its allure for musical discourse and performance, but also its potential for academic discourse on pop music.

In a preliminary audition of the pop musical discourse,⁴ one notices that the word “authentic” can take on various meanings:

The authentic can mean *original*, in the sense of truthful in terms of sound. This concept of perceptual fidelity has established itself within discourses on phonography, where high fidelity is valued and sound reproduction is understood as documenting some original, proto-phonographic event.

¹ This title plays on a quotation of a quotation: Schumacher (2003:307) used a quote from Connor (1989:153) in his title for an article (“... *never the live, always the ‘live’*“ (Schumacher 2003)) on authenticity constructions in pop music discourse. The “original“ argument by Connor (1989:153) concerned the relationship of live-performance and reproduction media: “The live is always in a sense a quotation of itself – never the live, always the ‘live’.“

² Pattie 2007:6

³ Pattie 2007:9

⁴ The elements of the authentic in pop music discourse mentioned in the following paragraphs represent the author’s subjective selection.

The authentic can mean *real*, in the sense of honest, sincere or true to a musical tradition or the specific values of a community or subculture. The imperative of keeping it real has become especially prominent with hip hop culture.

The authentic can mean *unique*, in the sense of innovative, genuine and – basically – new. Authentic here is the expression of a creative musician, producing a singular work that can stand for itself and adds something new to the canon.

And, the authentic can mean *simple*, in the sense of ordinary and unlaboured.

Throughout the history of popular music this notion of the authentic has been developed in the trope of the “commercial underdog”.⁵ In a distinction from the quintessentially non-authentic culture industry, music that is “less designed as a commercial venture”⁶ seems authentic. Recently this trope has been narrativized by casting shows on TV, which stage the self-consciously commercial culture industry against the seemingly unlaboured raw material of the musical talent, as well as against the allegedly ordinary people watching and calling in to the show.

This short, selective overview shows a spectrum of usages of the term that might suffice to characterize it as “weak” according to academic standards. Authenticity in pop music can hardly be taken as a term of universal validity, but rather as an evaluative term. Why should we use it then?

Pop music studies of cultural studies or ethnomusicological provenance prefer to base their findings on the theory and terminology emerging from the musical field itself – this “insider” terminology promises a tighter “fit” between the sonic material, its production and consumption and analytical discourse⁷. Thereby, terms such as authenticity wander from the fields of research to their academic description – they are taken up deliberately in a manner of ethnographic realism and with the belief that relevant knowledge is produced within the research field as much as it is gained by the view from above.

Taking into account the flexibility and processuality of authenticity within the field of pop music practice itself, such pop music studies have identified authenticity as a

⁵ Leach 2001:143

⁶ Leach 2001:143

⁷ see Brackett 1995:20

concept on the move⁸ and as a contextual term.⁹ It is for example relational to the historical point of its usage (romantic authenticity vs. modernist authenticity) or to the groups that use it (rock authenticity, hip hop authenticity, etc.). Also, authenticity has been described as a process of “authentication”.¹⁰ For example, citing its respective opposite - that which is contemporaneously represented as fake - can perform authenticity. But authenticity in pop music can also be established by citing bygone concepts of authenticity¹¹ - by citing the romantic authenticity that was prevalent in 60s rock for example. This might be done in a postmodern manner of pastiche, where the authentic is issued with quotation marks and the citation does not necessarily include a commitment. Here then, authenticity is gained not by opposing 60s rock but by carving out the historical specificity of 60s rock authenticity and by explicating the processuality of authentication itself. In acknowledging that the authentic of the past has become today’s fake, we also acknowledge that authentication relies on performance.

A synopsis of contemporary pop music studies discourse on authenticity could go something like this: Authenticity is not fixed in its content - it can take on historical or genre-specific notions - but it is also structurally important¹² to pop music discourse itself. The importance of this concept for pop music has been summed up by Elizabeth Leach¹³ who argues that authenticity is about “establishing and then defending the boundaries of what is thought “good” in popular music - artistically, politically and morally“. One might add that the pervasiveness of authenticity is exactly its point. The fact that authenticity is such an arbitrary sign in pop music and its discourse is exactly the prerequisite for its performative impact. As we have seen above, in order to gain authenticity in pop music, we can stage the inauthentic fake and distance ourselves from it, but we can also use the authentic of bygone periods and cite it in quotation marks or *markers of speech*. Both procedures stress the performative aspect of the authentic in pop music. By now authenticity has - amongst pop music audiences¹⁴ as well as pop music scholars - become accepted as performance. To clarify its impact and retrieve the term for academic language, it might be helpful to discuss it specifically as a speech act: in *speaking* authenticity, one can argue by tone and intonation and variably use a hearty tone

⁸ Pattie 2007:9

⁹ Schumacher 2002:298

¹⁰ Moore 2002

¹¹ see Auslander 2003

¹² Schumacher 2002:298

¹³ Leach 2001:143

¹⁴ Pattie 2007:11

of confidence or postmodern quotation marks. For example, the word “authentic”, spoken in quotation marks, means the speaker acknowledges the concept of authenticity but does not necessarily or fully subscribe to it. Now we can see why the “authentic” in gestural quotation marks (often used in the classroom) has also become the predominant usage within academic discourse – scholars acknowledge the concept of authenticity prevalent in their research fields without committing fully to it as a universally valid term. A very advantageous side effect of such performative speech acts is that we thereby authenticate ourselves as profound academics with methodological reflexivity and a well founded fieldwork ethos.

How did authenticity come to be *such* a weak term? It might be helpful to ask first where the word comes from and which connotations it has gathered on its way. From the perspective of the German and English languages, it is a foreign word and, as Adorno referred to it in the 1950s, a “magic word”.¹⁵ It was Adorno who introduced the term “authenticity” (“Authentizität“) in aesthetic and academic discourse at the end of the 1950s. Adorno was interested in the term exactly because it was then an uncommon one in everyday and academic language. As he argues in his essay “Words from Abroad” (1959), the strangeness of the word turns it into a “magic word”, for “in the hesitation the word gives rise to, all the concepts it calls to mind and nevertheless avoids flash by”.¹⁶ Without getting any further into Adorno’s concept of authenticity, it is noticeable that Adorno demonstrates the idea of the performative foreign word using the example of authenticity.¹⁷ As his essay on “Words from Abroad” tells us, the career of the word authenticity first begins in the 20th century. Although, as Adorno also admonishes, it might carry forward other, older concepts such as authorship, originality, and sincerity, the word authenticity only gains popularity in the 1950s. Authenticity therefore forms as a concept in the 20th century. The noun authenticity has been in use since the 18th century,¹⁸ but only as a minor word.¹⁹ Its roots are Greek, “authentis“, meaning a fusion of authority and originator. Here we already notice the stress on the performative principles of production and action, which form the heart of many authenticity

¹⁵ Susanne Knaller refers to the strangeness of the word – following Adorno – in the title of her monograph *Ein Wort aus der Fremde* (2007).

¹⁶ Adorno 1991:198

¹⁷ Nevertheless, Adorno himself has no verb for the procedure of authentication in his body of work, as Müller (2006:67) has noted.

¹⁸ Knaller 2005:40

¹⁹ Müller 2006:56

discourses today,²⁰ where authenticity is taken as an effect of a historically specific process of verification.

The term *authēntis* did not see much use until the 20th century. In the meantime, other concepts such as the autonomous, sincere individual developed and laid the groundwork for a rhetoric that was later in turn taken up by the concept of authenticity: in the place of an external world of gods, laws or norms, the sincere individual became the reputed authorial source within the grid of authenticity. Here the other Greek root of “authenticity” comes into focus: the self (Greek “*aut*“), which means self as well as same.²¹ The self-generating and self-accountable individual forms part of the technologies of the self that we have known since the 18th century. But only since the 20th century has the word authentic been employed in the sense of the sincere²² denominating the authenticity of a subject.²³ And so the term authenticity appears at a point in time when the sincerity-based concept of subjectivity is in the process of being replaced by selfhood. The technologies of the self have shifted the line along which truthfulness is negotiated, with the verifying instance of the process of authentication individualized, and this on a mass scale.²⁴ Authenticity clings to individuality, but in a specifically 20th century style of self-authentication and self-generation.²⁵

Pop music is a cultural formation that emerged at the end of the 19th century with the development of recording technologies and music publishing companies. Since the 1950s, pop music established itself as the “voice of the youth” and a socio-aesthetic force in Western societies. Therefore, pop music was born with a 20th century authenticity and bears its paradoxes. We should oppose a notion of authenticity in pop music that grounds it in the romanticism of rock music and that reduces it to a fixed referent. In contrast, taking authenticity as a figure of speech enables us not only to understand the performativity within authenticity, but also to criticize its effectiveness. Only then are we equipped to criticize the uses that authenticity has been put to in pop music: the trope of self-generation so successfully used by Madonna and her successors is also a euphemism

²⁰ see Müller 2006:57

²¹ Middleton 2006:206

²² Knaller 2005:41

²³ Knaller 2007:22

²⁴ see Bergmann 2004:98

²⁵ The Greek term *authēntis* also denominated a murderer – namely one who commits suicide or the murder of relatives (Knaller 2007:10). Although the semantics of the self-destructive are not prevalent in contemporary notions of authenticity (Knaller 2007:13), one could see reverberations of this in the self-destructive and sometimes literally deadly self-authentications of pop music performers.

for self-governmentality. I want to argue that the critical point here is how, in which way and in what tone the trope of authenticity is spoken.

The Scottish singer-songwriter Sandi Thom chose a highly specific way of authenticating herself. In early 2006, she generated attention on the social networking site myspace.com as a “selfmade artist“. Sandi Thom appeared on myspace with self-recorded videos of her basement rehearsal space performances. It was reported that these recordings received tens of thousands of views within a short period of time.²⁶ Up to this point, Sandi Thom flawlessly performed the figure of the “dedicated and talented but as yet-undiscovered artist”. This well-trodden and somewhat worn-out narrative path of popular music culture usually comes with a happy ending: the discovery and success of the talented artist. Shortly after the webcasts, Sandi Thom signed a record deal with the major label Sony/RCA. This story generated some controversy in the news media and suspicion arose about the “DIY Sandi Thom”: Thom signed the Sony deal in April 2006, but was the major label involved all along, orchestrating the myspace-campaign? The label and Sandi Thom stood their ground and - even after an army of bloggers had discussed the possible machinations of the case - insisted that their involvement began only after the series of webcasts. Nevertheless, around the same time a PR company conceded to having been commissioned by Thom several months before.²⁷ And Thom herself admitted publicly that a professional streaming company had arranged the webcasts of her performance videos.²⁸ While it wasn't a major label, Sandi Thom did have some professional hands helping to market her as a “selfmade internet superstar“. Yet despite the disclosures (or maybe exactly because of the them) that the DIY Sandi Thom was a fake, in early June 2006 her song “I wish I was a punk rocker” climbed to No.1 position in the Uk Single Charts. To explain her success, Sandi Thom countered by referring to the quality of her music. In the controversy that arose after the involvement of professional promotion, she contended: "I'm not a fake. And look at my band - they're not fakes".²⁹

²⁶ “Was Sandi Thom's effortless rise just too good to be true?” *The Independent*. May 30, 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/was-sandi-thoms-effortless-rise-just-too-good-to-be-true-480288.html>, retrieved on July 13, 2009.

²⁷ An internet superstar - or just another rock'n'roll swindle? *The Guardian*. May 31, 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/may/31/news.media>, retrieved on July 13, 2009.

²⁸ Sandi Thom Interview. *Channel 4*. April 4, 2006. <http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/world/sandi%20thom%20interview/163535>, retrieved on July 13, 2009.

²⁹ Anarchy OK But It's Family First For This Punk Rocker. *Daily Record*. July 8, 2006. http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/tm_objectid=17346747&method=full&siteid=66633&headline=anarchy-ok-but-it-s-family-first-for-this-punk-rocker--name_page.html, retrieved on July 13, 2009.

Sandi Thom's "real music(ians)" versus "fake stardom" argument self-consciously demonstrates how the "commercial underdog" in pop music is constructed. At first glance, Sandi Thom might be understood as an example of what Lawrence Grossberg has termed "authentic inauthenticity".³⁰ Grossberg introduced authentic inauthenticity as a *post*-authenticity logic of popular music culture. He argued that in the 1970s the logic of authentic inauthenticity was taking the place of the ideology of authenticity, which itself was established by rockism in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, for Grossberg authentic inauthenticity is not a form of authenticity, but is post-authentic. Authenticity was connected to the ideologies of the self-present voice and the phonocentric speaking guitar Grossberg saw prevalent (only) in rock music. For him, the postmodern media economy completely changed the existing pop music apparatus and replaced the privileged role of sound with that of the image.³¹ While Grossberg's fixation on sound as the intrinsic quality of pop music and his devaluation of the visual have already been successfully critiqued,³² taking the Sandi Thom case into consideration one could propose an adjustment of his term: referring to both the performative nature of the term and its historical legacy, one could speak of "inauthentic authenticity" in order to describe the way Sandi Thom has employed the trope of authenticity. At the beginning of the 21st century, the principle of authenticity remains as intact as it has been since its establishment in the last century. As the Sandi Thom case shows, authenticity in pop music is performed authenticity - it can be spoken even with an inauthentic tone. Evidence suggests that even the deconstruction of authenticity itself, the fake! with an exclamation mark can authenticate in pop music.

In order to describe more precisely the notion of the "inauthentic authentic", two further aspects have to be considered: the notion of voice and the concept of "sounding" in pop music. Grossberg has lamented that in (what for him are) post-authentic times (since the 1970s) pop music fans while continuing to assign authenticity no longer fully invest themselves in it. In contrast, one could say with regards to pop music that authenticity has always been performed in only a partially committal way, by a certain intonation and use of voice. This is due to pop music's artistic endeavour to find alternatives to the phonocentric, self-present notion of the voice inherited from western

³⁰ Grossberg 1993:206

³¹ Grossberg 1993

³² Auslander 1999:73ff, Gracyk 1996:219ff, Schumacher 2002:300

classical music. This inherited persistent vocal principle has been successfully infiltrated by notions of sound reproduction in pop music that differ from traditional phonography. Instead of the animated, vital “vox” or “phone“, noise has been introduced as musical material - by making the central medium of pop music recorded sound that has no clearly identifiable source. The record and the music video are the guarantors of authenticity in pop music.³³ A live performance must live up to them as its benchmark³⁴. Or to quote Frank Sinatra: “I discovered very early that my instrument wasn’t my voice [...], it was the microphone”³⁵.

Sounding (that is “to make a sound”) in pop music is not considered a self-presencing, but rather a distorting voicing. We could understand this account of sounding as distorted voicing in pop music by taking it as a rhetorical notion of voice. In a rhetorical situation, the double bind of a voice comes into foreground: the voice has the potential of pointing towards a real speaking body behind it, and also towards picking up the voices of other, non-present bodies. In rhetorical theory the voice appears twice.³⁶ First in the lessons on *elocutio*, the decoration of speech, where the voice is an aspect of the affective conduction of speech and intonation and sound of the voice become important. And second, the voice appears in the lessons on the *topoi*, the argumentations, as the trope of “*prosopopoiia*“. *Prosopopoiia* is the trope of speaking for someone or “giving a voice“. In *prosopopoiia*, the speaker’s voice cannot be the one, self-identical *vox* or *phone*. The speaker speaks for someone else, evoking this person’s *persona* by using a personal noun or a certain style of voicing. In the rhetorical situation the speaker, the spoken of and even the addressee of the speech can merge their voices.

In 1993, Grossberg himself rightly pointed out that authenticity in pop music refers to two dimensions, “first, how and of what the music speaks (...); and second, to and for whom the music speaks (...)”.³⁷ Yet the mystical power of music to speak does not have to be reduced to the self-present, phonocentric voice as Grossberg understands (and criticizes) it. Speaking truthfully for others can be done with a distorted rather than sincere voice in pop music. I therefore suggest looking at sounding in popular music as a rhetorical scene.

³³ Goodwin 1993:77

³⁴ Auslander 1999

³⁵ Elborough 2009:142

³⁶ Menke 2002

³⁷ Grossberg 1993:202

Authenticity wears quotation marks in pop music. It is used as a figure of speech, spoken with a distorting pitch of the voice or otherwise with utter conviction - as we have seen with Sandi Thom. Her approach to authenticity can be criticized as affirmative if we listen to her intonation. Her use of a self-satisfied tone while deconstructing authenticity closes down rather than opens up the contexts of this trope. In her take on authenticity, originality and historical authorship become the influential predecessors again, closing down the critical potential Adorno has spoken of. Adorno hoped that in the use of the magic word authenticity and especially “in the hesitation the word gives rise to, all the concepts it calls to mind and nevertheless avoids flash by”.³⁸ Indeed, beyond the examples mentioned in this paper, other more radical intonations of authenticity have been employed by a multitude of artists within the form of pop music.

In American English quotation marks are sometimes called rabbit ears. Rabbit ears are soft and long, they beckon to us and speak of the shrewdness of the rabbit. The authentic in pop music has always had such rabbit ears listening back to the echoes the authentic has produced in its terminological history. Pop music is born natively “authentic” with such ear-shaped quotation marks and authenticity is a persistent feature of the pop music form.



³⁸ Adorno 1991:198

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